

The 2016 Devolved Elections in the UK

Introduction

The 2016 elections to the Scottish Parliament, National Assembly for Wales and Northern Ireland Assembly were the fifth such contests for each institution. It is indicative of how devolution has continued to be rolled out that the winning parties in each contest could look forward to presiding over significantly more powers than in the 2011-16 period, let alone the 1999-2003 devolved model. At first glance, the results in each of the devolved countries in 2016 did not appear radically different from the electorate's verdict five years earlier. Nonetheless beneath the basic headlines there was evidence of some shifts in public opinion.

Scotland

The Scottish Parliament elections were contested with the electorate still suffering a post-independence referendum hangover. The acute nationalist versus unionist faultline evident in the 55 per cent to 45 per cent split in favour of continued Union in September 2014 was almost replicated eight months later in the Westminster election, this time with half of voters supporting the SNP against unionist parties. The SNP had been weaker in UK-wide elections compared to Scottish Parliament elections until that point. The 2015 breakthrough yielded 56 of Scotland's 59 UK parliament seats. An SNP triumph appeared assured in 2016; the question begged was its size. Could the SNP replicate its remarkable 2011 overall majority? Table 1 shows the results.

Table 1 Scottish Parliament Election Result 2016

	Constituency seats	Change from 2011	Constituency vote share %	Change from 2011 %	Regional vote share %	Change from 2011 %	Regional seats	Change from 2011	Total seats
SNP	59	+6	46.5	+1.1	41.7	-2.3	4	-12	63 (-6)
CONS	7	+3	22.0	+8.1	22.9	+10.6	24	+12	31 (+16)
LABOUR	3	-12	22.6	-9.2	19.1	-7.2	21	-1	24 (-13)
LIB DEMS	4	+2	7.8	-0.1	5.2	0.0	1	-2	5 (no change)
GREENS	0	0	0.6	+0.6	6.6	+2.2	6	+4	6 (+4)

Turnout: 55.6% (+5.2%)

The achievement of the SNP in capturing an overall majority at Holyrood in 2011 was truly extraordinary under an Additional Member System. Expectations of a repeat were commonplace, but the mobilisation evident amid the fervour of the independence referendum and subsequent anger at defeat was less apparent. The SNP may also have suffered slightly from some voters using their second ballot paper, the regional list vote, to opt for a second choice party. Nonetheless, the SNP came very close to achieving a second consecutive overall majority in a system designed to prevent majoritarianism, its constituency vote share rose and the Party leader, Nicola Sturgeon, enjoyed consistently strong approval ratings. As such, whilst opponents spoke of how the SNP had 'peaked', plateaued may be a wiser term at this stage.

The SNP did not promise another referendum, its manifesto insisting that 'The SNP will always support independence but that is not what this election is about' (Scottish National Party 2016: 10). The focus of the SNP campaign was upon the claimed superiority of its other policies and the need for more powers. The Smith Commission, hurriedly established by the UK Prime Minister immediately after the independence referendum to take forward the emergency devolutionary promises of unionist parties, was derided by the SNP as a 'missed opportunity' (Scottish National Party 2016: 35) which left 70 per cent of tax and 85 per cent of welfare expenditure decision-making at Westminster.

Nonetheless, following the Scotland Acts of 2012 and 2016, the 2016-21 Scottish Parliament possesses significantly more powers than the institution created by Labour at the close of the twentieth century, with a new Scottish rate of income tax, borrowing powers and control of stamp duty, land and air taxes, half of VAT receipts and several welfare benefits. Even the franchise differed, with votes for 16 year olds permitted for the first time in a Scottish Parliament election in 2016, having been allowed in the independence referendum. The UK's Brexit vote in June 2016 provided an opportunity to revive the prospect of an independence referendum. Scotland voted to remain by 62 per cent to 38 per cent and with consent for Brexit forthcoming from neither people nor parliament, a second independence referendum became a distinct possibility.

Scottish Labour suffered the humiliation of losing second place to the Conservatives, following on from the meltdown loss of 40 seats in the 2015 Westminster election. Labour's vote share has fallen in every Scottish Parliament election. Labour still suffers from what former leader Johann Lamont described as its London 'branch office' status. The Scottish Conservative revival can be attributed to three things; clear messages, including unabashed unionism, the promise of strong opposition and effective, charismatic leadership from Ruth Davidson. A party changing the leader with the regularity of Scottish Labour is also unlikely to thrive: Wendy Alexander, Iain Gray, Johann Lamont, Jim Murphy and Kezia Dugdale have all wrestled with Scottish Labour's problems since the party lost office in 2007. In a twist on George Robertson's foolish boast about the future of nationalism, it appears that devolution is threatening to kill labourism stone dead.

Wales

The result in Wales confirmed Labour's semi-dominant status. It was hardly a resounding Labour triumph, the party recording its second-lowest ever vote, but the outcome exceeded performance. Labour obtained almost half of the Assembly seats on one-third of the votes. Labour's constituency dominance – the party holds two-thirds of such seats – is such that the party's thin performance beyond its heartlands is not greatly damaging, allowing (minority) government to be resumed. Table 2 provides the full 2016 result.

Table 2 National Assembly for Wales Election Result, 2016

	Constituency seats	Change from 2011	Constituency vote share %	Change from 2011 %	Regional vote share %	Change from 2011 %	Regional seats	Change from 2011	Total Seats
LABOUR	27	-1	34.7	-7.6	31.5	-5.4	2	0	29 (-1)
PLAID CYMRU	6	+1	20.5	+1.3	20.8	+3.0	6	0	12 (+1)
CONSERVATIVES	6	0	21.1	-3.9	18.8	-3.7	5	-3	11 (-3)
UKIP	0	0	12.5	+12.5	13.0	+8.5	7	+7	7 (+7)
LIBERAL DEMOCRATS	1	0	-2.9		6.5	-1.6	0	-4	1 (-4)

Turnout: 45.3% (+3.1%)

Plaid Cymru restored the 'natural order' of second place (2011, when they slipped to third behind the Conservatives, might be seen as an aberration). The result confirmed the decline of the Liberal Democrats, who had previously enjoyed a consistent seat tally (six in each election, dropping to five in 2011) forfeiting deposits in 26 of 40 constituencies and failing to win a single regional seat. Four constituencies provided half of the party's support, emphasising how the Liberal Democrats barely exist as a force in some parts of Wales. However, the Party's solitary representative, Kirsty Williams, was thrown a lifeline by Labour's need to shore up its minority rule, being awarded the post of Education Secretary. Via an initial tied Assembly vote, the opposition parties had threatened to block the re-election of Carwyn Jones as First Minister, before Plaid Cymru agreed a deal with Labour. The durability of that deal remains uncertain, given that Plaid's leader, Leanne Wood, denied her party was offering a 'confidence and supply' arrangement. Much may depend upon the content of Labour's initial legislative agenda, which includes measures on Public Health, child protection and the Welsh language.

Having made ground at previous Assembly elections, the Conservative Party suffered a disappointing result, losing nearly four per cent of their vote, the solidity of Labour's vote partially responsible, along with an uninspiring Conservative campaign and possibly two other minor factors: UKIP and anti-devolutionists. UKIP's rise to obtain seven Assembly seats was a development foretold, following the party's strong performance in Wales in the 2015 Westminster election. The Welsh Government and Assembly have consolidated significantly over the previous decade. The Government of Wales Act 2006 gave the Assembly primary legislative powers and turned the Executive into a distinctive government with a separate character from the Assembly, whilst a 2011 referendum vote gave the Assembly law-making powers across twenty subject areas. Since then the Assembly has also gained powers over some taxes and borrowing

What factors best explain the result? Party leadership, image and campaign all appear important. Plaid Cymru's Leanne Wood and Labour's Carwyn Jones were seen as the best two leaders (in that order) and polled identically in terms of who would make best First Minister (Scully 2016). The images of the parties reflect longstanding perceptions with Labour most likely to be seen as representing the ordinary person. Crucially Labour was well ahead on the question of who would best represent 'people like you?' Plaid Cymru were viewed as particularly representative of Welsh speakers and the Conservatives were associated with more affluent societal strata (Scully 2016). Whilst there was some variation from the 2015 Westminster election, notably Conservative under-

performance in 2016, the overall message from Wales was as previously: Labour tenaciously ‘representing class and nation against Plaid Cymru competition’ (Bradbury 2015: 114).

Labour’s favourable UK-wide image as custodian of the NHS may have valuable in neutering the problems associated with health services in Wales, where missed performance targets had been highlighted by critics and unfavourable comparisons made with England. Health was listed as the biggest single priority by the Welsh electorate, cited by one-third of those polled. Almost two-thirds of voters were aware that the Welsh Government was responsible for the NHS, a possible result of the attacks on the performance and governance of the NHS in Wales that came from the UK government. Jobs were the second most important issue, with immigration’s high ranking at third place (almost half of those polled felt that immigration to Wales was too high) contributing to UKIP’s arrival in the Assembly (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-politics-35688583>, 1 March 2016). That immigration was not a devolved issue did not stop it registering as a significant feature of the campaign.

Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland, the same top five parties were returned in exactly the same order, with virtually the same number of seats as in 2011. On the Unionist side, the DUP and UUP were returned with exactly the same totals. A quiet contest did not exactly yield votes of confidence in any of the ‘Big Five’, all of whose vote share fell. The results are shown in Table 3. Turnout also fell, as it has at every contest since the Assembly was created, albeit only slightly this time. The election saw two left-wing candidates from People Before Profit (PBP), one topping the poll in Sinn Fein’s stronghold of West Belfast. Following the contest, an official Opposition was formed for the first time.

Table 3 The Northern Ireland Assembly Election Result, 2016

	SEATS	CHANGE FROM 2011	% VOTE SHARE	% CHANGE FROM 2011
DEMOCRATIC UNIONIST PARTY	38	0	29.2	-0.8
SINN FEIN	28	-1	24.0	-2.9
ULSTER UNIONIST PARTY	16	0	12.6	-0.6
SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC AND LABOUR PARTY	12	-2	12.0	-2.2
ALLIANCE PARTY	8	0	7.0	-0.7
GREEN PARTY	2	+1	2.7	+1.8
PEOPLE BEFORE PROFIT	2	+2	2.0	+1.2
TRADITIONAL UNIONIST VOICE	1	0	3.4	+1.0
INDEPENDENT	1	0	N/A	N/A

Turnout: 54.9% (-0.7%)

The DUP's success in getting 86 per cent of its candidates elected was a remarkable achievement. The choice of Arlene Foster as leader to replace the retiring Peter Robinson was sensible, boosting the Party only five months before the election. Untypical of her party, which is only 27 per cent female and 28 per cent Church of Ireland (Tonge et al. 2014) Foster has appeal to a broad swathe of unionists, spanning Church of Ireland moderates and hardline Free Presbyterians; Orange and non-Orange Protestants; men and women; border and urban unionists.

The central message from the DUP was that unionists must stop Sinn Féin's Martin McGuinness becoming First Minister. There is still mileage in sectarian head-counting. Those disdaining that form of politics tend not to vote, with non-voting particularly high among the young. The DUP prefers to concentrate upon the 55 per cent who do vote. The DUP accompanied the 'Stop McGuinness' message with a more positive '5-Point Plan' focused upon the economy, jobs, services and education. The 'Plan' was little more than a utopian wish-list but created a useful aspirational image. Having felt obliged to play the 'Stop Sinn Féin' card in the early months of her tenure, we will now see whether the DUP leader and First Minister ushers in politics owing less to the past.

Northern Ireland may have had a DUP-Sinn Féin duopoly for almost a decade at Stormont but the mutual loathing of their respective support bases remains. Less than one per cent of DUP and UUP transfer votes under the PR-STV system went to Sinn Féin. DUP to DUP surpluses ran at over 70 per cent with around 20 per cent going to the UUP. Ethnic bloc voting on traditional lines still prevails. As the Westminster election last year showed when the party regained two seats, the UUP, in freefall for the previous decade, has stopped the rot but is struggling to articulate a clear alternative to the DUP.

Within Nationalism, there is now a radical challenge from the Left from PBP. The Internationale versus A Soldier's Song represents an interesting contest of ideas and loyalties. Sinn Féin was criticised for complicity in welfare cuts (even though these were ameliorated in the 2015 Fresh Start Agreement) and scorned by hardline republicans for managing British rule. This was the first time Sinn Féin's vote share had fallen in an Assembly election, although the Party increased its seat majority over its nationalist rival, the SDLP and dominates the nationalist bloc.

The failure of the UUP and SDLP to close the gap on the DUP and Sinn Féin underpinned reconfiguration, as Northern Ireland moved from inclusive grand coalition consociation to a system of government and opposition. Provision for an official Opposition came via the Assembly bill of John McAllister (ironically to lose his seat in 2016). It allows formal recognition, finance and Assembly debating time. Given the presence of the UUP and the SDLP, i.e. unionists and nationalists in opposition, opposing the unionist and nationalist parties of the DUP and Sinn Féin respectively, the old Unionist versus Nationalist, Protestant versus Catholic, Orange versus Green divisions ought to be superseded by new political fractures.

Nonetheless, a cross-community coalition of unionists and nationalists remains mandatory. It has merely been reduced to one party from each side. Moreover, some social issues divide on old faultlines. The DUP and the bulk of the UUP oppose same-sex marriage whereas the Nationalist parties want legalisation. Although an official opposition has been created of the UUP, SDLP and (probably) Alliance, there will also be unofficial oppositions from the left (Greens and PBP) and from

the Right, the solitary Traditional Unionist Voice representative. A period in opposition may sharpen the clarity of the messages of the main opposition parties – but what will they find to oppose?

Conclusion

The 2016 elections re-affirmed the dominant parties in power in the devolved UK polities and shaped the nature of politics until the next round of contests in 2021. Party outcomes displayed the asymmetry which has characterised the institutional apparatus and powers of governance associated with devolution. 2016 saw a continuation of SNP hegemony and the eclipse of Labour in Scotland, whereas Wales confirmed its status as a Labour country in which nationalism is weak. Northern Ireland maintained a trend evident since the 2003 election; the dominance of the DUP and Sinn Féin as the representatives of unionism and nationalism, locked less in a cross-community embrace than a mutual acknowledgement of their right to divide the spoils of office. As with all previous devolved elections, turnout was below that for Westminster contests, indicating that, nearly two decades after their arrival, such battles are still regarded as slightly second order. This may be unsurprising given that each devolved election thus far has taken place amid debate over what further powers will be conceded from Westminster. Perhaps the 2021 contests will take place amid more settled and substantial devolved arrangements in which debate centres more upon the use rather than acquisition of powers – but that may be optimistic.

References

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